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American Art

By R. J. COADY

THERE are those whose tender years have been moulded and muddled in the public schools. There are those whose majorities have been provided with academic rule and law. There are those whose spectacular senses have been thrilled by the stunts of technique. There are those whose metaphysical proclivities have been excited to a dizzy hysteria by ismism.

Therefore my first chapter needs explanation.

By American Art I mean the aesthetic product of the human beings living on and producing from the soil of these United States. By American Art I mean an American contribution to art.

We are developing a new culture here. Its elements are gathering from all over the earth. We are making adjustments and getting results—physical, intellectual, aesthetic. Traditions are being merged, blood is being mixed. Something new, something big is happening here.

An Englishman invented the Bessemer Process and we built our sky-scraper. A Dane married a Spanish-African and Bert Williams sings "Nobody." We've dug into the soil and developed the Steam Shovel, we play ball and we box.

We're young, we're immature, we've made mistakes. We've imported our academies, our technique and our "new movements." We've imitated European art and neglected the things at home.

The Old World can teach us a lot. Her masters can develop our taste and help us realize ourselves. Greece can show us where subtle emphasis goes farther than exaggerated distortion and where affinity of subject and object will generate a work of art. Rome can teach us proportion and the division of space. Lorrain and Von Gogh can show us that color is light. Cezanne can show us form.

Taste would alter the Steam Hammer. It would change a handle here or a bolt there, it would straighten this line or curve that,

it would vary textures and show a delight in the meeting of planes—and if it equalled the creative construction of the hammer we'd have a mighty art!

We need our art. But we're getting very little from our art world. It can't come from the Academy or the money old ladies leave. It can't come from imitating "Representation" or by substituting rule for taste. It can't come from turning paint into brush-strokes and marble into mush. It can't come from "Greek plays" or "The Yellow Jacket." It's not in "the march of civilization" from the Chinese Theatre to "When Did You Last Write to Mother?" It's not in the imitation of Franz Hals and Velasquez or Cezanne and Picasso. It won't come from the "Photodrama," "Intolerance" or a multiplication of naughts. It can't come from the substitution of dexterity for taste. It can't come from clouds or "the womb of the soul." It's not in the fifth dimension or the three hundred and sixty-first degree. It can't come from "Bigness" for fullness. It can't come from reducing drawing to angles and curves, or separating color from form. It can't come from free freedom or political paint. It can't come from "Elimination" beyond the unit, or from "Cubism," "Planeism," "Lineism" and blank canvases. It can't come from labels or labeled mysticisms. It can't come from theory in place of taste. It can't come from inventing nativities and organizing cosmoses; from smart sets or synchromocivic insolence. It won't come if we rub out yesterday and to-day. It's not coming from oyster talks, from lectures, write-ups, pamphlets, prefaces, catalogues, books, volumes of explanations that don't explain.

Our art is, as yet, outside of our art world. It's in the spirit of the Panama Canal. It's in the East River and the Battery. It's in Pittsburgh and Duluth. It's coming from the ball field, the stadium and the ring. Already we've made our beginnings, scattered here and there, but beginnings with enormous possibilities. Where they will lead, who knows? To-day is the day of moving pictures, it is also the day of moving sculpture. . . .

We need our art. I believe we have more artificial dissipation, more fads, mannerisms and affectations than any country in the world. And this because we have not enough art. We run to this ism and to that ist hunting explanations of the substitutes for the

art we ought to feel in our bones. Our wasted energy might build another Rome.

We need an art more than a monarchy needs it. We are more factional, more cosmopolitan, we need a welding factor. Our democracy is inadequate. Democracy has spread, in varying degrees, to all nations. The French are not coming here in large numbers. Nor are the English. They have as much democracy as we, and they have their traditions. The German comes, he's thrifty, but why should he give up his Bach, Beethoven, Wagner, Weber, Mozart, Mendelssohn, Durer, Cranach, etc., etc.? He doesn't—unless he is ignorant of his racial traditions. Perhaps he will forget these in a few generations, but is such a one a strong factor for American culture? So with the Italian, the Greek and the Russian. The Chinaman would come if we'd let him, but I don't think he'd swap his Buddha for a Library lion or a Barnard Lincoln. The Irish, Jews and other down-trodden peoples find a haven here, but the Jew has his Talmud and the Irish the Book of Kells. We will be a hyphenated nation until we have an art.

(To be continued)



I now wandered along the heath, till I came to a place where, beside a thick furze, sat a man, his eyes fixed intently on the red ball of the setting sun. "What is your opinion of death, Mr. Petulengro?" said I, as I sat down beside him.

"My opinion of death, brother, is much the same as that in the old song of Pharaoh, which I have heard my grandam sing:

'Cana marel o manus chivios

Ta rovel pa leste o chavo ta romi.'

"When a man dies, he is cast into the earth, and his wife and child sorrow over him. If he has neither wife nor child, then his father and mother, I suppose; and if he is quite alone in the world, why, then, he is cast into the earth, and there is an end of the matter."

Lavengro.